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**JSSE twentieth anniversary**

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## Foreword

Emmanuel Vernadakis and Linda Collinge

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# Foreword

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- 1 Founded by Ben Forkner in 1983, the *Journal of the Short Story* celebrates its twentieth anniversary this year. An official celebration, organized by the Journal editors and by Olivier Tacheau, director of the Presses Universitaires d'Angers, took place at the University of Angers on May 22. John McGahern was the guest of honor and participated actively by reading from his story "Gold Watch" then answering questions from the audience. He also accepted to participate in an interview which is published here for the first time and read two additional stories — "Korea" and "Parachutes" — whose recordings you will find on the accompanying compact disc. We were impressed by his skill and touched by his kindness, helpfulness and generosity. The anniversary issue is therefore dedicated to John, and also to Madeline McGahern, as a mark of our inmost gratitude and sincere friendship.
- 2 The issue is a double volume and includes both a series of critical essays and interviews of short-story writers. Although each piece was initially meant to stand alone, as it were, brought into thematic sequences the papers and interviews take on a new import and endow the volume with a quality in keeping with the genre it is devoted to; for indeed it was our intention that the volume followed a principle of unity and read, if not like a novel, at least like a short story cycle!

## Staff contributions

- 3 The renewal of the reading committee has been one of the most significant undertakings of the *Journal* in the past few years. Their dedication has been priceless in the shaping of each issue, but we also hope their readers' reports have been appreciated by contributors as a means of breaking the isolation with which the researcher is so often confronted. We are pleased to announce that the critical essays in this volume have been written exclusively by members of the new editorial staff composed of short story scholars from French and International Academia. Their contributions are tokens of commitment and friendship.

- 4 Four years ago, John McGahern attended a talk given by T. C. Theoharis on Beckett and Dante. In Theoharis' own words, it was a "discussion off the top of [his] head" on the common points and differences in the ancient Greeks', Dante's and Beckett's reactions to the human condition. In January 2003, when we asked John McGahern to be our guest for the celebration of the JSSE 20th anniversary, he still remembered the talk. It is for McGahern's sake that Theoharis wrote "Ché la diritta via era smarrita": Dante's *Commedia* in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*," a piece which will certainly mark Beckett studies.
- 5 In her essay on "The Short Story According to Woolf," Christine Reynier proceeds like an archaeologist. Proportion, perfection, honesty, inconclusiveness, freedom, intensity, ethics and aesthetics are some of the scattered fragments she found in the diggings. She put them together into a theory dominated by a feminine "I", shifting the short story from a masculine ground of "confrontation" to a feminine ground of cross-fertilization.
- 6 In her essay on the visual qualities of the short story, Liliane Louvel gets down to the root of the Word to study the way in which concept and sound become vision. To illustrate her theory she discusses two of Woolf's stories. Her meticulous study points out that the mode of expression that gives the short story its distinctive statute is the reflective voice of a narrating Eye.
- 7 Plunging into the Canadian and post-modern depths of Arnason's Icelandic past, Heliane Ventura, too, plays with reflections. She discusses the dialectics between reality and fiction in a witty and completely new reading of his well known story "Sunfish." Keeping up with the latest publications and evolutions of the genre, Mary Condé chose to study a recent and as yet un-collected story by another Canadian writer, Alice Munro, and proposes a feminist approach to the story.
- 8 In his cratylian essay on Kipling's "How the Alphabet was Made," Laurent Lepaludier discusses the workings of meaning in the process of creating signs. His paper offers a synthesis of the various linguistic processes at work as perceived by theorists and the artist at the turn of the century.
- 9 Suzanne Ferguson's substantial essay on "Sequences, Anti-Sequences, Cycles and Composite Novels: the Short Story in Genre Criticism" has been used to conclude the section not only because of its wide scope and insight but also because, at some point, each of the other essays finds an echo in it.
- 10 The essays are followed by an index of proper names of more than 500 short story writers and critics covering JSSE issues from 1 to 40. The index will soon be available on both the Angers <http://buweb.univ-angers.fr/PRESSES/revues/JSSE/JSSE.html> and Belmont <http://www.belmont.edu/english/dept.cfm?idno=220> websites, updated every year

## Writers' insight

- 11 A long-standing (twenty-year!) tradition of the JSSE has been inviting short-story writers to Angers to read from their work and participate in an interview during the Research Center's annual conference. In twenty years, seventeen writers have been interviewed by members of the editorial staff. It was our wish for this anniversary issue to bring together these interviews - four of them in first publication - in a single volume, not only to pay homage to these generous writers, but also to propose an "anthology of reflections" on the short-story writing process. Though each writer has his own personal experience of writing, a number of recurrent ideas become visible in this juxtaposition of dialogues. The

following selection of quotes from the interviews reveals how writers conceive their work and how they conceptualize short-story writing. It is also meant to whet your appetite for further reading of this anthology...

## Being a reader first

"I was a voracious reader. I tell all my writing students: 'You learn to write by reading.'" - Olive Senior

"I don't think you can be a writer without being a reader first, and you need to read a lot, for the pleasure and for the experience. When I was ten or eleven, I was given the run of a 19th century library and for about five or six years, maybe more than that, I would come on my bicycle and return five or six books then take five or six books away." - John McGahern

"I was a keen reader, like a lot of writers are, and having read a great deal, I guess I just began to put things together." - Grace Paley

"I was a voracious reader. I would not say I had read the whole of Walter Scott but I had read a good half of him by the time I was sixteen. And I had read the whole of Thackeray, most of Dickens and was on to Balzac and Tolstoy." - VS Pritchett

## Influences

"I love Hemingway, Chekhov, Tolstoy..." - Tobias Wolff

"Arnold Bennett was so passionately fond of Chekhov that he had two complete sets of Chekhov's stories – one in his London house and one in his country house." - John Wain

"I love Turgenev's work and I think Turgenev's novels are more closely linked to the novella than they are really to the long novel." - John McGahern

"I think Joyce's 'The Dead' is one of the finest short stories, not only in the English language, but in literature." - Graham Greene

"I was very much interested in the form of the short story as I read in Joyce ; people of my age were really reading a lot of Joyce at that time."

- Grace Paley

"I think Beckett's 'Dante and the Lobster' is one of the greatest short stories." - AS Byatt

"I think any short-story writer owes something to Maupassant." - VS Pritchett

"In the field of the short story, Guy de Maupassant is one of my favourite authors. Henry James, of course, is the outstanding one." - Muriel Spark

"Maupassant has always been very important to me." - John Wain

## Personal history and writing

« Il est bien évident que la réalité nourrit la fiction. (...) Certaines de mes nouvelles sont autobiographiques, mais toujours de façon déguisée. Je n'ai rien fait qui soit entièrement autobiographique. Il n'y a que des éléments. » - Mavis Gallant

"There are a great deal of autobiographical elements in my stories, but they are transformed or filtered." - VS Pritchett

"In some way, I've made all my serious writing mistakes when I stuck close to the facts. They have to be reimagined, reinvented, reshaped, so basically they conform to an idea and not to oneself." - John McGahern

## Defining the genre:

### -the short story and poetry

"The short story is much closer to poetry than it is to the novel, even though they are both prose." - Grace Paley

"I was quite a child when I started writing and I wrote poetry. When I was about 30, I started writing narrative poetry which told a story, and from that I moved into the short story." - Muriel Spark

"My fundamental view about the story is that it begins as a poetic insight, and that it is also a way of seeing through a situation, a 'glimpse through', as someone has said in which you are in fact writing something perhaps like a short poem. I think the best examples of the short story in this sense are the sonnets of Shakespeare. Each sonnet is an intricate piece of poetry, but at the same time it is 'a glimpse through' the life, a situation, the instance of feeling that he is evoking." - VS Pritchett

"I think a short story is much closer to a poem than a novel is." - AS Byatt

"A perfect short story is like a perfect song." - Barbara Kingsolver

### -the short story and drama

"I've written a volume of one-act plays, *Presences*. (...) I think that the short story is much closer to the play than it is to the novel, that it's a dramatically compressed literary form, and I've pointed out that it's much more natural to go into a play than to go into a novel, generally speaking, for short-story writers and yet short-story writers are pushed into writing novels by the market." - Peter Taylor

"In Ireland, there was a link with the Abbey Theatre where they produced a large number of one-act plays, and the one-act play was the thing which was becoming extremely popular in Europe outside Ireland. Really the idea had come to Ireland from Europe. Such plays are of course a step to the writing of short stories." - VS Pritchett

"The short story is much more closely connected with drama or the poem than the novel." - John McGahern

### -the short story vs. the novel

"The short story, vis-à-vis the novel, is almost exactly like a drawing as compared to the painting." - John Wain

"People like to read novels as if they were getting into a nice hot bath. They like to 'lose themselves'. Whereas in the best stories you find yourself. The best stories wake you up. Even if they wake you up to preposterous things, they do wake you up." - VS Pritchett

"There is an enormous difference between a novel and a story. The novel is closely connected with society. A short story has a completely different rhythm than a novel." - John McGahern

"The novel depends enormously upon its sense of a stable social structure and the short story does not really depend on there being a social structure at all. Perhaps there is one of some sort, but it can direct itself to life outside the theoretical or practical interest of the country."

- VS Pritchett

"I think a short story is driven by plot and a novel is driven by character. A short story doesn't really give you room for a full characterization, whereas a novel requires a great deal of characterization, to sustain your interest and to compel you through the entire story." - Barbara Kingsolver

« Le roman a besoin de tisser des liens entre les événements, et il faut être Stendhal ou, mieux encore, Flaubert, pour réussir à rendre chaque passage intéressant. Par

contre, dans la nouvelle, tout le ‘connective tissue’ est supprimé. Il n’y reste que les temps forts. » - Mavis Gallant

### -concision and thought in short-story writing

“A story must never explain, it must enact and suggest.” - VS Pritchett

“I think that all good writing is suggestion.” - John McGahern

« La description fait partie de ce superflu que j’évoquais à propos du roman. Je la trouve inutile et ennuyeuse. Une atmosphère se dégage d’elle-même, elle se crée autour du récit, comme par magie. Si vous voyez, le lecteur voit aussi, quelques indices suffisent. » - Mavis Gallant

“One should really leave something for the reader to construct, something individual so that every reader should get something special for himself.” - Muriel Spark

“One of the things that I am at home with in Chekhov is the degree to which he trusts his reader to travel beyond the given, to collaborate with him in the making of his stories, and this is most evident of course in his endings. Chekhov was doing something very different from what, say Tolstoy, was doing. Tolstoy wrote a short story like a novel, and there was a sense of finality to his conclusions.” - Tobias Wolff

“I started seeing things in a very condensed clear way, as images. I start making it into a thing much more like a poem, which is a story, and it can have people attached to it who don’t have to have immensely complex characters or histories.” - A.S. Byatt

“I like to write with a kind of intensity.” - Alistair MacLeod

“I work the stories out in my head before I go to my computer. Therefore I feel that they’ve been worked on by my unconscious a lot before I actually put them on paper. I believe that the work comes from a very deep part of myself.” - Olive Senior

“I never write anything unless it is in my head for a long time.” - John McGahern

“Everything that I have done has been well received and I think part of that is because I thought a lot about it.” - Alistair MacLeod

« Il faut parfois des années pour qu’une histoire prenne corps. L’idée germe et mûrit petit à petit, j’y réfléchis, elle me travaille, et je ne me mets à écrire que lorsque je la sens tout à fait au point. » - Mavis Gallant

Though short-story writers rarely perceive themselves as theoreticians, the theoretical insight they provide is a precious resource for scholars. The *Journal* is glad to make these resources available and hopes to continue for years to come as a tool for progress in the field of short-story research.

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